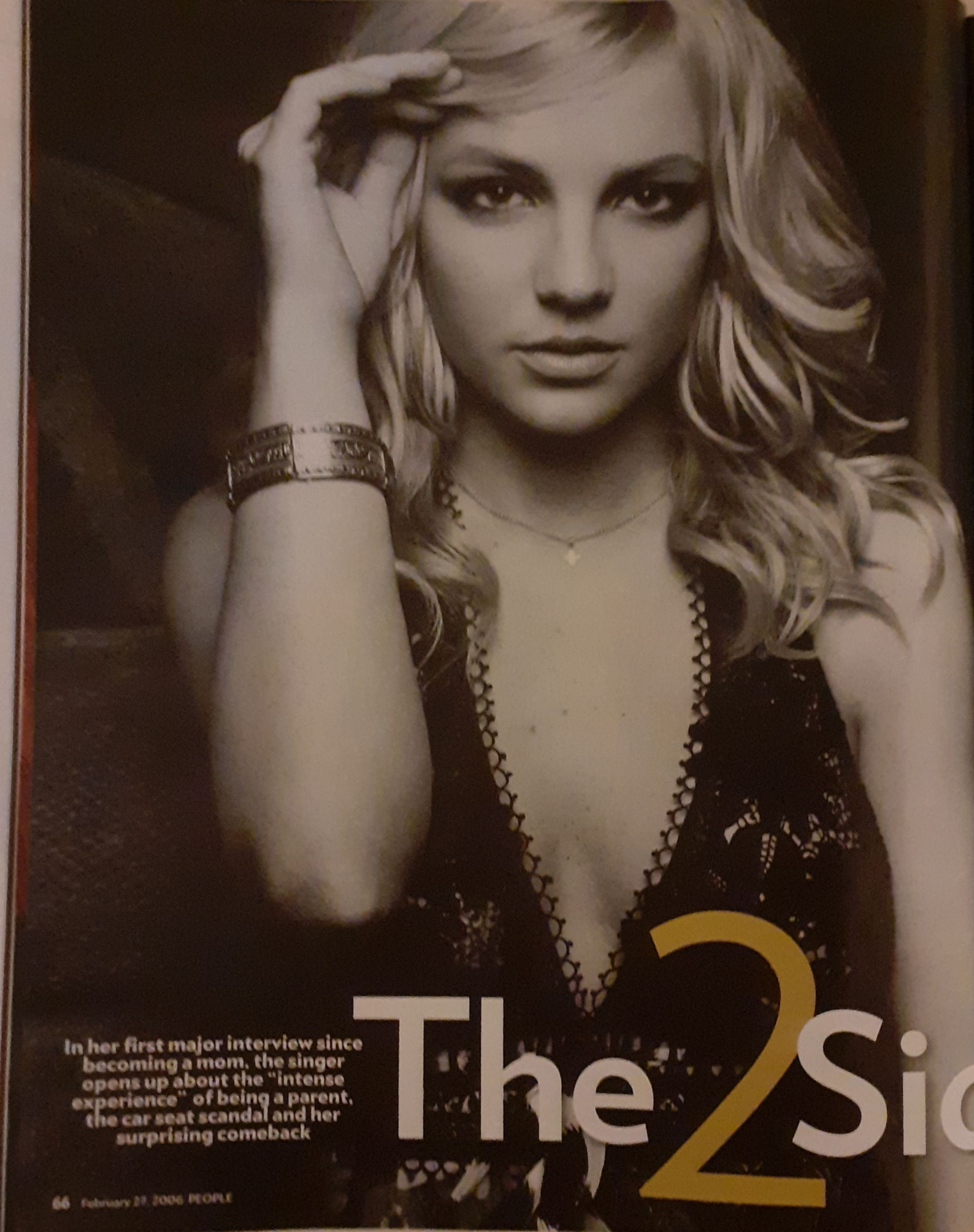

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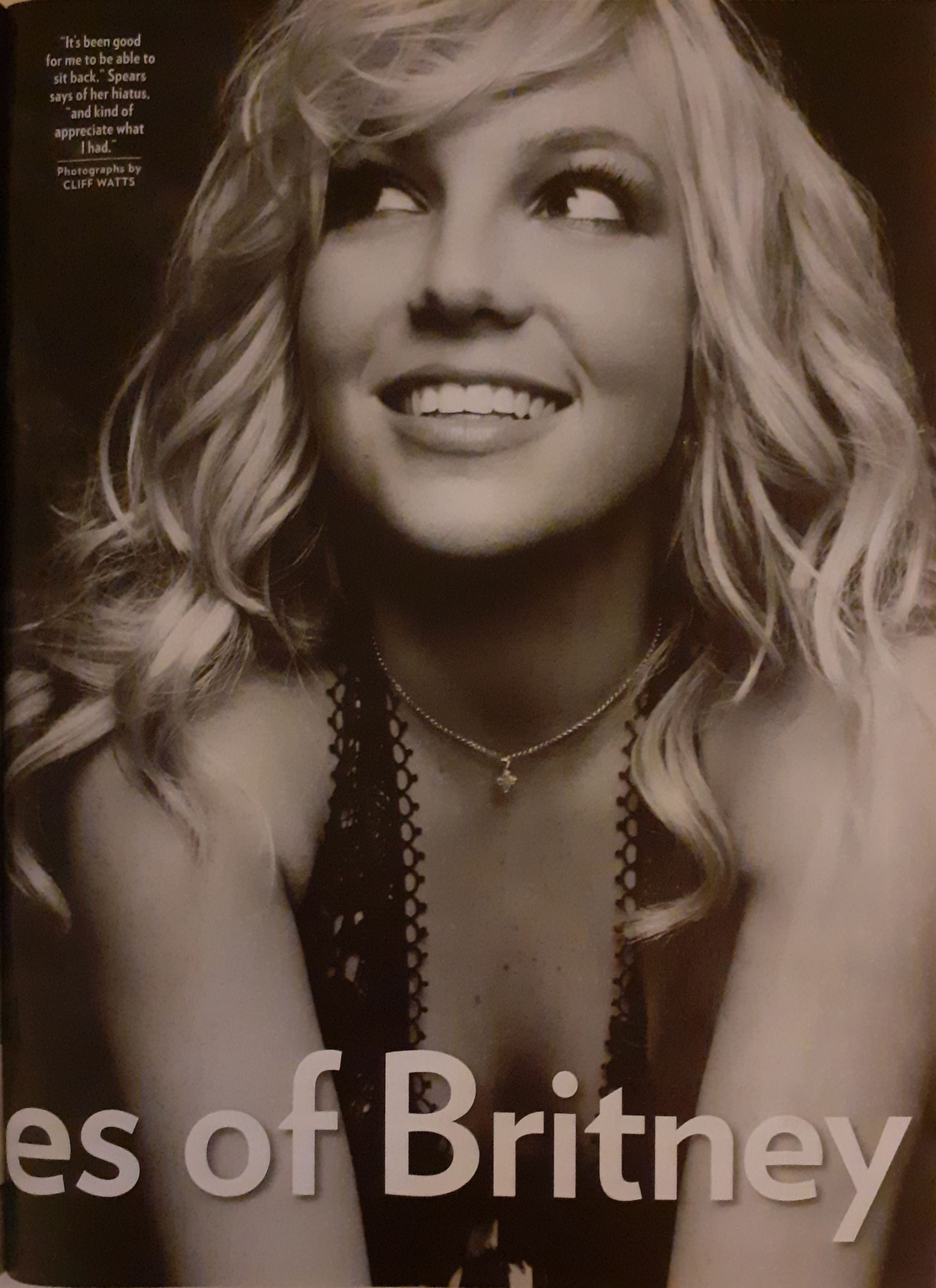
In her first major interview since becoming a mom, the singer opens up about the "intense experience" of being a parent, the car seat scandal and her surprising comeback



"It's been good for me to be able to sit back," Spears says of her hiatus, "and kind of appreciate what I had."

Photographs by CLIFF WATTS

es of Britney

I'm going to [get back to work], but I'm going to do it with definite balance for my baby"

It has been 20 months since Britney Spears was last on tour and more than two years since she released an album of new material. But that doesn't mean the singer has stopped performing. These days her audience tends to be small—just one wriggly fan—the venue intimate and the singing unplugged. "I'll sing him 'Mary Had a Little Lamb,'" Spears says of crooning to her 5-month-old son Sean Preston. "And I make up stuff." She pauses and considers for a moment. "I found out after the baby," she says earnestly, "that I can sing!"

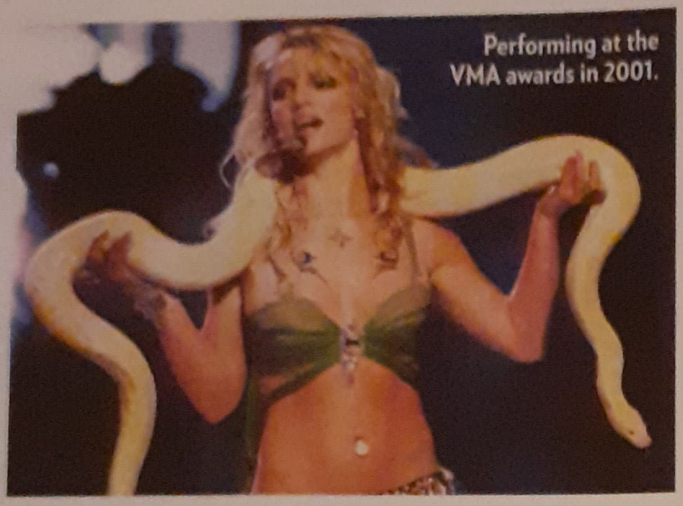
It's one of the many realizations new to Spears since entering Club Mom last September. Motherhood "is such an intense experience," says the 24-year-old singer, sipping a mango margarita at a Mexican restaurant in Santa Monica, Calif., down the coast from the newly remodeled home she shares with husband Kevin Federline, 27, and "Sean P," as the new parents sometimes call their son. Unnoticed by the lunch crowd in tinted sunglasses and a sleeveless geometric print dress, Spears is alternately confident when she speaks about her imminent return to the recording studio and exasperated when conversation turns to the subject of the paparazzi. This is clearly a more resolute, more guarded Britney than the one who once only had to look out for herself. "I'm going to [get back to work], but I'm going to do it with definite balance for my baby," she says, "because I want him to have the best of both worlds."

For a star who has led more of her life in the spotlight than out, the challenge now is bridging the dueling worlds of motherhood ("Mary had a little lamb/ Its fleece was white as snow") and pop superstardom ("And everywhere that Britney went/ Paparazzi were sure to go"). The singer's parental judgment came under serious fire Feb. 6 when she drove with Sean Preston on her lap—drawing sharp criticism on behalf of everyone from the Mommy and Me set to the U.S. Secretary of Transportation, who called her actions "irresponsible." Last week Spears explained that she was just acting instinctively while trying to evade aggressive paparazzi; now she addresses the incident with caution. "I love my baby more than anything," she says, "and as unfortunate an experience as this has been for me and my family, if it brings more attention to child safety then I fully support that."

But ask about the photographers who track her every move, and her frustration is palpable. "I don't really go out with him," she says of Sean Preston. "And it's kind of sad because I can't walk down the street

"I'm not complaining about my lifestyle, because [Sean Preston] will get to travel and see the damn world—that's amazing," says the singer. "Still, I want him to know the roots of who I am."

That feeling of being on the stage, knowing it's your best—I love that"


Performing at the VMA awards in 2001.

with the stroller. I'm not expecting people to pity me. I'm just telling the truth. I've pulled over and asked the cops, 'Could you please help me? They've been driving recklessly back there.' And they say, 'Sorry, ma'am, I can't help you. This is how it is.' I mean, Princess Diana got killed by one of these people. They're crossing the line."

Then she looks up and shakes her head. "I sound bitter. I'm not bitter. I'm doing great. I really am. I'm happy. I'm very blessed. I have a beautiful home, a wonderful family, supportive, loving people around me. I have a great life."

Now, after a year and a half marriage-and-maternity leave, Spears—who recently made the scene with Federline at the Screen Actors Guild and Grammy Awards party circuits—is resuming her busy life with the pent-up passion of a benched player twitching to get back in the game. Coming up: a guest turn on *Will & Grace* set to air April 13 ("I have been laughing so much every day on the set!") and a Feb. 28 live appearance on *Good Morning America* from New Orleans, where she has been active in helping to rebuild her home state via her hurricane relief fund. "I'm not going to be performing," she says. "I thought instead that it'd be more meaningful if I surprised a group of girls to spend the day with them doing things that I used to like to do in Louisiana when I was younger. I know it'll be such an emotional trip, but it will also be uplifting to see the city continuing its traditions."

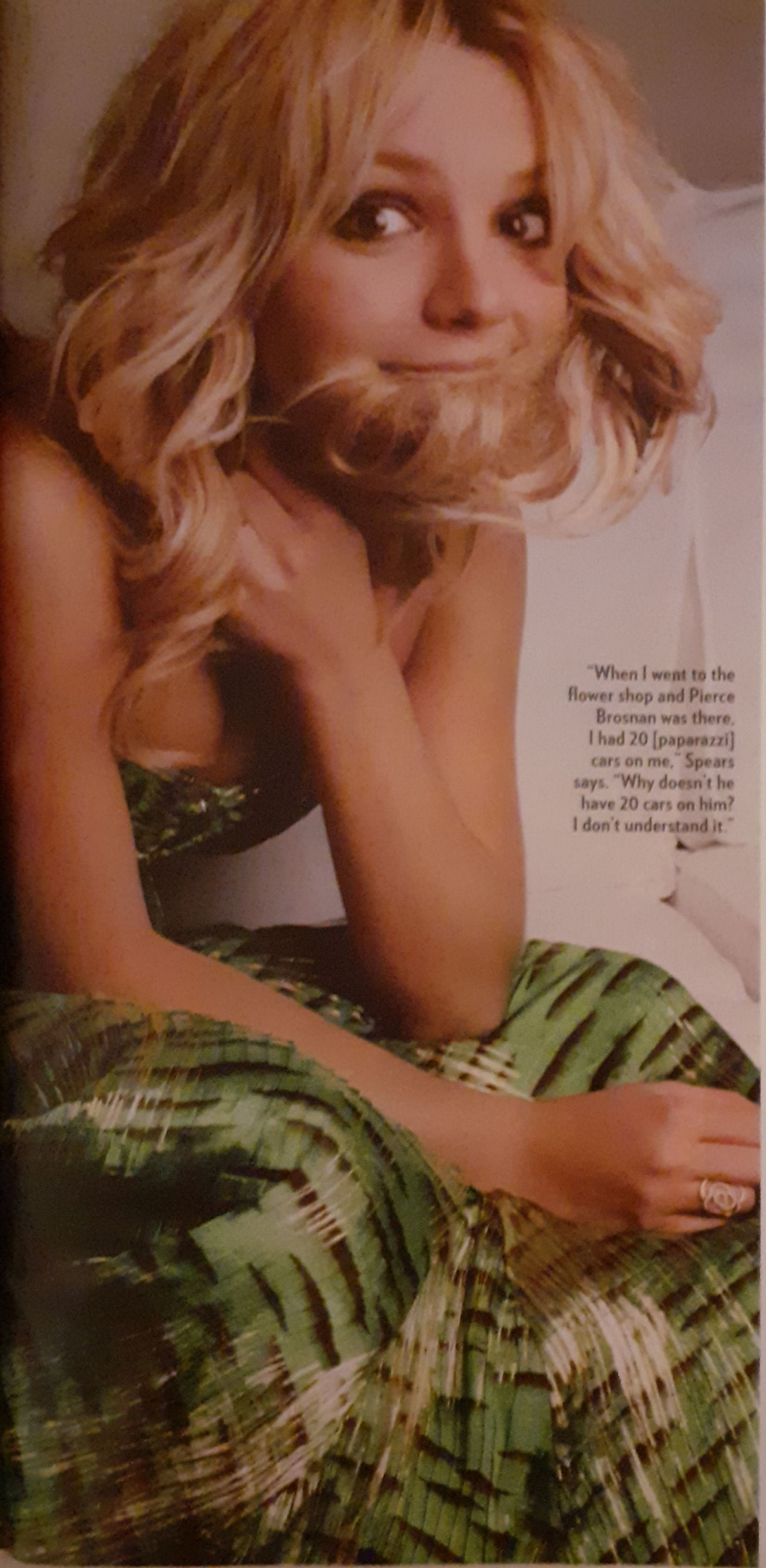
And then there's her music. The same exhausted star who told PEOPLE three months before giving birth that "the pace I was going at was ridiculous" can't wait to get back to doing what she loves. "This may sound weird, but I miss traveling," she says. "I miss the road, seeing different places and being with the dancers and having fun. That feeling of being on the stage, knowing it's your best—I love that. I needed a break. I needed to be hungry again."

More like ravenous. "She's a true competitor in the very best sense of the word," says Barry Weiss, president and CEO of Zomba Label Group, of which Spears's label, Jive Records, is a part. "I think she knows that she's got a big, big place in the market she wants to reclaim. She says, 'I belong out there. I can do these things.'" Spears is more pointed in her critique of the musical landscape. "It's a huge lull," she says. "I haven't seen anybody out there who has had a performance where I'm like, 'That's f-----' awesome.' It's been boring. Nothing's been *wow* to me."

Aiming for a release later this year, she has been recording in her home studio, experimenting with live musicians and stripping down her sound. "I'll get on the pian-*ah*," she says in her Louisiana twang, more pronounced in person than it is in her public appearances, "and just play whatever feels good." Hearing herself sing to Sean Preston has proved a turning point. "When I was little, I would listen to myself," she says. "But the record label signs you, and you're just thankful to get a hit song. You can't really show off your voice and where you came from."

Which brings her back to Louisiana. Growing up, "I used to listen to blues music and all that stuff," she says. "I would like to try to have more influences of that sound. Not that I'm going to be like frickin'

LEFT: GARY HERSHORN/REUTERS/CORBIS. DRESS: ZAC POSEN/NEIMAN MARCUS. JEWELRY: RON HAMI



"When I went to the flower shop and Pierce Brosnan was there, I had 20 [paparazzi] cars on me," Spears says. "Why doesn't he have 20 cars on him? I don't understand it."

Tina Turner. But you never know."

Eager as she is to return to performing, she is not yet the Britney who could famously match her backup dancers move for move. Although she is rapidly returning to her pre-baby body thanks to "a combination of cardio, weights, yoga and Pilates and long walks with the baby," she is still troubled by the 2004 knee injury she sustained while shooting her "Outrageous" video. "It's fine if I go in the gym and start dancing, but when I really start challenging myself, it starts snapping," she says. "I just have a feeling if I really go for it, it's not going to happen."

She has changed in other major ways as well. The star who let it all hang out on last summer's reality series *Britney & Kevin: Chaotic* is now far more protective of her personal life. "I would love to talk about my pride and joy," she says of her son, "but once you do it with one interview, then the door is open and people take advantage of it." When asked if she could open the door to talking about her husband, she says, "Just a little" before addressing his forays into hip-hop. "He goes into the studio and has his own vibe," she says. "I'm really impressed."

Clearly she has been burned by the endless scrutiny of her marriage. "Look at Jennifer Aniston—she went on *Oprah* just to say she's okay," says Spears. "It does affect you to a certain extent. It has to. I don't take myself so seriously, but when you've been poked at and poked at, there's going to come a time when you're going to snap."

Late in the interview, Spears's face lights up during a call to Federline to arrange their evening plans; the pair exchange easy laughs about Sean P. It is that little guy, after all, who has changed the singer's world for good. And she is keenly aware that juggling her fierce ambitions with the sometimes messy contradictions of motherhood—that unique mix of vulnerability and invincibility—will test her like nothing else. "In the car on the way here, I was crying because I was listening to country music," she says. "I love L.A., but I know what I am. I'm a country girl at heart. I long to be at home. I like that simplicity for my child. I really, really do."

By Michelle Tauber. Michael Fleeman in L.A.